GLITTERING VICES

A NEW LOOK AT THE SEVEN DEADLY SINS AND THEIR REMEDIES

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CONTENTS

Acknowledgments 7

Introduction 9

1. Gifts from the Desert: The Origins and History of the Vices Tradition 25
2. Envy: Feeling Bitter When Others Have It Better 41
3. Vainglory: Image Is Everything 59
4. Sloth: Resistance to the Demands of Love 79
5. Avarice: I Want It All 99
6. Anger: Holy Emotion or Hellish Passion? 117
7. Gluttony: Feeding Your Face and Starving Your Heart 139
8. Lust: Smoke, Fire, and Ashes 159

Epilogue 181

Notes 187

Index 202

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INTRODUCTION

To flee vice is the beginning of virtue.—Horace

Several years ago I found myself in my first year of graduate school, wishing I were somewhere else. Everyone in my classes seemed so smart, so witty, so well read, so eager and able to ask brilliant and insightful questions. I felt like an impostor. How did I—obviously so inferior—ever get admitted with *these* people? How soon would they find out who I really was (or wasn't), and quietly shoo me out the back door in disgrace? Partly I struggled with genuinely difficult philosophical texts; mostly, however, I struggled with my own sense of inadequacy. So instead of engaging in class discussions and seeking out opportunities to improve myself, I spent that first year of graduate school pulling back into the shadows, believing I had nothing much to contribute, hoping no one would notice when I wrote something stupid.[1]

A few years later, reading Thomas Aquinas (1224–74) on the virtue of courage, I happened across a vice he called pusillanimity, which means "smallness of soul." Those afflicted by this vice, wrote Aquinas, shrink back from all that God has called them to be. When faced with the effort and difficulty of stretching themselves to the great things of which they are capable, they cringe and say, "I can't." In short, the pusillanimous rely on their own puny powers and focus on their own potential for failure, rather than counting on God's grace to equip them for great work in his kingdom—work beyond

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anything they might have dreamed of for themselves. Picture Moses at the burning bush, said Aquinas. The future leader of Israel in one of the greatest episodes of its history—the exodus from Egypt—stands there stuttering that he's not qualified, and asks God to send Aaron instead.

Reading Aquinas's account of the vice of pusillanimity was like looking at myself in the mirror for the first time. I had a name for my problem, one that made sense of my anxieties and struggles. At the same time, the biblical portrait of Moses presented inspiring evidence that God's power and grace can transform even—or especially—the weakest and most fearful of us:[2] Moses's pusillanimity did not have the last word in his life; God did.

It's a bit ironic, I suppose, that the discovery of this *vice* in myself turned out to be not only illuminating, but also liberating. Finally I understood what held me back, and calling it by name was a small yet significant step toward gradually wresting free of its grip. That I shrank back from all God called me to be and that I judged my own abilities as inadequate because I was not relying on God's grace to grant me strength—these perhaps are insights so obvious I should have seen them for myself. Yet seeing ourselves clearly is often difficult. Sometimes we need to hear a precise diagnosis from someone else, and to hear it at a particular time.

I have often joked that every time I read Aquinas I find another vice I never realized I had. My sense, however, is that whether or not we run the risk of becoming moral hypochondriacs, finding ourselves guilty of a new sin every day, most of us would benefit from some deeper moral reflection and self-examination—as I did in graduate school.

A study of personal vices can be a catalyst for spiritual growth, if it is done within the context of spiritual formation. This project of spiritual formation finds a natural home in the work of Thomas Aquinas, since Aquinas does not organize his major text on the moral life around the vices, but rather around the virtues and spiritual gifts. His central focus and framework is the people of good character we are meant to become. The pursuit of righteousness and moral excellence is the primary task—not obsession with the sins that so often entangle. So, along with Aquinas and many others in the Christian tradition, the present study will examine the vices within the context of spiritual formation. This book, based on his inspiration and insights, offers the conceptual tools to illuminate our personal stories, enable

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penetrating diagnoses of our struggles, and—more importantly—give us a glimpse of life beyond the entrapments of sin.

Contemporary Treatments of the Seven Deadly Sins

Reading Aquinas, I found the vices to have revealing and illuminating power. By contrast, many voices in contemporary culture, unfortunately, dismiss, redefine, psychologize, or trivialize them.

Some dismiss the vices on the grounds that they are not moral problems at all. In a tract recently republished by NavPress, the Reverend James Stalker proclaims, "On the whole, I should be inclined to say, gluttony is a sin which the civilized man has outgrown; and there is not much need for referring to it in the pulpit."[3] Francine Prose, likewise, confuses gluttony with feasting in her chapter "Great Moments of Gluttony,"[4] and Robert Solomon questions "why God would bother to raise a celestial eyebrow about [the vices]" given that "the 'deadly sins' barely jiggle the scales of justice"—as if sloth were nothing more than "a bloke who can't get out of bed," lust were nothing more than "one too many peeks at a *Playboy* pictorial," and gluttony were nothing more than "scarf[ing] down three extra jelly doughnuts."[5] These dismissals of the vices as irrelevant or trivial would be easier to swallow if they had anything much to do with the traditional conceptions of sloth, lust, gluttony, and the others.

Other authors attempt to redefine the seven vices as virtues—and to recommend them as such. In most of these cases too, what they are talking about has no clear relation to the original vice at all. For example, Michael Eric Dyson celebrates "black pride" in his book on the vice of pride; Wendy Wasserstein's parody of sloth offers a detailed "self-improvement plan" for becoming lazier;[6] and Simon Blackburn rejects the notion of disordered sexual desire altogether in his book on lust. "Everything is all right," he reassures us. "By understanding it for what it is, we can reclaim lust for humanity, and we can learn that lust flourishes best when it is unencumbered by bad philosophy and ideology, by falsities, by controls . . . which prevent its freedom of flow."[7]

Elsewhere, the vices are psychologized: gluttony becomes a quaint name for various eating disorders, wrath is wholly treatable in anger management seminars, and pride is replaced by talk about self-esteem. Psychologist Solomon Schimmel recounts a session with one Catho-

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lic patient who was struggling with lust: "What were the effects of therapy? My client overcame unpleasant feelings about premarital sex with an affectionate companion who was also a marriage prospect . . . Therapy made her much happier."[8] The general implication of all this psychologizing is that just as we have abandoned the spiritual counsel of benighted Christian monks, we can leave safely behind any notion of the danger or seriousness of these "vices" as genuine moral problems.

The vices are most often treated as a matter of lighthearted humor. Evelyn Waugh remarks that the term *sloth,* is "seldom on modern lips. When it is used, it is a mildly facetious variant on 'indolence,' and indolence, surely, so far from being a deadly sin, is one of the world's most amiable of weaknesses. Most of the world's troubles seem to come from people who are too busy. If only politicians and scientists were lazier, how much happier we should all be"—in part, he goes on to argue, because then one wouldn't make the effort to commit any of the really bad sins, such as pride.[9] Martin Marty reports that the French have sent a delegation to the Vatican to get gluttony off the list, because *la gourmandise* (the French term usually translated as "gluttony") connotes not gluttony but "a warmhearted approach to the table, to receiving and giving pleasure through good company and food."[10] And in 1987, *Harper's* magazine ran a feature called "You Can Have It All! Seven Campaigns for Deadly Sin," in which seven Madison Avenue advertising agencies each created a print ad "selling" one of the seven vices. Sloth's tagline reads, "If the original sin had been sloth, we'd still be in Paradise."[11]

Most contemporary approaches to the vices, therefore, neither recognize nor respect the centuries of Christian teaching on the subject. If all we know about the vices comes from contemporary sources, we will probably oversimplify, stereotype, and scoff at moral problems or rationalize them away. It is easy, especially now, to substitute silly or shallow parodies for the actual content of centuries of moral reflection by philosophers and theologians. But if contemporary voices do indeed misunderstand the tradition or present only a shallow and dismissive reading of it, then in following them, we risk misunderstanding both our past and ourselves. If we were to go back to the tradition and learn what gluttony was and the kind of power it can wield in us, would we find it so natural and unproblematic that vastly more Christians today are dieting than fasting? Could we be missing something here?

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An honest look at our own intellectual history requires that we listen carefully to the wisdom of the past. Unless we have some sense of what our own tradition has to say on the subject, Christians will not know how to engage contemporary challenges to historical conceptions of the vices. What is worth keeping and defending from the past? What insights might enrich our own spiritual formation and confessional practices? What concepts and definitions will enable us to recognize and restore broken aspects of our world and culture? Most fundamentally, of course, a Christian understanding of these seven vices requires taking sin and vice to be genuine moral categories. This book aims both to take sin and moral formation seriously and to take centuries of Christian wisdom on the subject seriously as well.

Vices and Virtues

In a book on the vices, we ought to be clear what a vice is. How are vices and virtues distinguished? How is a vice different from sin? Understanding these terms will give us a foundation to explore the tradition and its history in chapter 1, where we will answer questions such as: Where did the list of vices come from? What does it mean to call a set of them "capital vices" or "deadly sins"? Which ones should we single out as "capital," which as "deadly," and why? We begin here, however, with the concept of vice itself.

Although most references to the lists of seven use "vice" and "sin" in a roughly synonymous way, distinguishing the two turns out to be important. A vice (or its counterpart, a virtue), first of all, is a habit or a character trait. Unlike something we are born with—such as an outgoing personality or a predisposition to have high cholesterol levels—virtues and vices are acquired moral qualities. We can cultivate habits or break them down over time through our repeated actions, and thus we are ultimately responsible for our character.

By way of an analogy, think of a winter sledding party, in which a group of people head out to smooth a path through freshly fallen snow. The first sled goes down slowly, carving out a rut. Other sleds follow, over and over, down the same path, smoothing and packing down the snow. After many trips a well-worn groove develops, a path out of which it is hard to steer. The groove enables sleds to stay aligned and on course, gliding rapidly, smoothly, and easily on their way. Character traits are like that: the first run down, which required

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some effort and tough going, gradually becomes a smooth track that one glides down without further intentional steering.[12] Of course, a rider can always stick out a boot and throw the sled off course, usually damaging the track as well. So too we can act out of character, even after being "in the groove" for a long time. In general, however, habits incline us swiftly, smoothly, and reliably toward certain types of action.

Virtues are "excellences" of character, habits or dispositions of character that help us live well as human beings. So, for example, having the virtue of courage enables us to stand firm in a good purpose in the midst of pain or difficulty, when someone without the virtue would run away or give up. A courageous friend stands up for us when our reputation is unfairly maligned, despite risk to his own personal or professional reputation; a courageous mother cares for her sick child through inconvenience, sleepless nights, and exposure to disease. Courage enables us be faithful to other people and our commitments when the going gets rough and so enables the loving, trusting, and secure human relationships that are essential to a good human life.

Courageous individuals are still admirable people even when their good purposes are thwarted: when the friend's reputation becomes unfairly tarnished or when the sick child does not recover. We think it is better to be the sort of parent who suffers for and with her sick child than to be the sort of parent who can't handle sacrifice and leaves the hard work of caregiving to others. So virtue helps us both to live and act well *and* to be good people, as Aristotle once famously wrote.[13] Similarly, the vices are corruptive and destructive habits. They undermine both our goodness of character and our living and acting well. In the chapters that follow, we will explain how wrath, lust, gluttony, and the rest have a corrosive effect on our lives—how they eat away at our ability to see things clearly, appreciate things as we ought, live in healthy relationships with others, and refrain from self-destructive patterns of behavior.

Virtues and vices are gradually internalized and become firm and settled through years of formation. Often we develop habits by imitating those around us or following their instruction. We may or may not be intentional about all of our habit formation. For example, most children develop habits by imitating their parents, and in this way both virtues and vices can "rub off," so to speak. Other times, habit formation is the cumulative effect of many small, casual choices,

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similar to developing a smoking habit. Someone who wants to quit smoking after many years, or break any habit, needs serious deliberation and self-discipline. Sometimes we have a crisis that brings a new perspective. We see ourselves as if for the first time and want to change. But to make good on that desire to change, we have to wrestle daily against a deeply ingrained habit—and wrestle, perhaps, for the rest of our lives.

Very simply, a virtue (or vice) is acquired through practice—repeated activity that increases our proficiency at the activity and gradually forms our character. Alasdair MacIntyre describes a child learning to play chess to illustrate the process of habit formation.[14] Imagine, writes MacIntyre, that in hopes of teaching an uninterested seven-year-old to play chess, you offer the child candy—one piece to play, and another piece if the child wins the game. Motivated by his sweet tooth, the child agrees. At first, he plays for the candy alone. (And he will cheat to win, in order to get more candy.) But the more the child plays, the better at chess he gets. And the better at chess he gets, the more he enjoys the game, eventually coming to enjoy the game for itself. At this point in the process, he is no longer playing for the candy; now the child is playing because he enjoys chess and wants to play well. And he understands both the intrinsic value of the game and the way cheating will now rob him of that value. He has become a chess player. Moral formation in virtue works much the same way. We often need external incentives and sanctions to get us through the initial stages of the process, when our old, entrenched desires still pull us toward the opposite behavior. But with encouragement, discipline, and often a role model or mentor, practice can make things feel more natural and enjoyable as we gradually develop the internal values and desires corresponding to our outward behavior. Virtue often develops, that is, from the outside in. This is why, when we want to re-form our character from vice to virtue, we often need to practice and persevere in regular spiritual disciplines and formational practices for a lengthy period of time. There is no quick and easy substitute for daily repetition over the long haul. First we have to pull the sled out of the old rut, and then gradually build up a new track.

As with most human endeavors, we usually do not do this alone. Our parents, most obviously and deeply, contribute to our character formation, but so do friends, mentors, historical figures, and the community of saints past and present. If we marry, our spouse will shape our character, as will our teachers, and the fictional characters we read

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about and find inspiring. Our coworkers influence our habit formation, and so do the friends with whom we spend the most time—which is why good parents care so much about their children's friends. When we make a new resolution or try to cultivate a new habit, having a community back us, or even a single partner with whom to practice or from whom to learn, can make all the difference.

In the end, both virtues and vices are habits that can eventually become "natural" to us. Philosophers describe the perfect achievement of virtue as yielding internal harmony and integrity. Compare, for example, the following two married persons: The first, let's call Jane. Although she resists them, Jane regularly struggles with sexual feelings for men other than her husband. The second, call him Joe, enjoys an ardent affection for his wife throughout the ups and downs of thirty years of marriage. Are they both faithful? In a technical sense, at least, yes. Jane successfully exercises self-control over her wayward desires. But only Joe embodies fidelity as a *virtue*. His faithfulness is deeply rooted in who he is. While we can give her moral credit for her efforts, Jane's faithfulness stays on the surface; it is the uncomfortable voice of conscience countering her adulterous inclinations and keeping her actions in check.[15] By contrast, Joe's desires are in harmony with his considered judgment.[16] Who wouldn't rather have a spouse with Joe's fidelity than Jane's self-control?

The ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle called this the difference between acting *according* to virtue—that is, according to an external standard which tells us what we ought to do whether we feel like it or not—and acting *from* the virtue—that is, from the internalized disposition which naturally yields its corresponding action.[17] The person who acts *from* virtue performs actions that fit seamlessly with his or her inward character. Thus, the telltale sign of virtue is doing the right thing with a sense of peace and pleasure. What feels like "second nature" to you?[18] These are the marks of your character.

Virtues and Virtuous Character

As the previous examples make clear, it is not enough merely to *want* to be virtuous, or to wish we had greater harmony between our motivation and our action. One can aspire to be a better person, or want not to be corrupt or weak, but not yet have a clear sense of how to achieve those goals. "Cultivate good character" is a useless prescrip-

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tion if we don't know what good character amounts to and how to cultivate it. We need to be able to pinpoint our shortcomings and set our sights on specific objectives. If cultivating virtue and avoiding vice is the key to moral formation, then we need to know first of all what the particular virtues and vices are.

When I ask my students and friends to list various virtues, they invariably name things like honesty, courage, kindness, loyalty, and fidelity; for the vices, the list usually includes qualities like cowardice, greed, and selfishness. A *Newsweek* article on character education came up with this list of virtues: "prudence, respect, loyalty, love, justice, courage, hope, honesty, compassion, fairness, and self-control."[19] Answers like these are generally on the right track. Despite our distance from traditions of ethics that focus on the virtues and vices, we retain a sense of what should count. But why privilege one list of vices over another? What makes one list a random collection and another an ordered set?

Contemporary lists given by my students usually share an important feature with those of the Christian virtue tradition. The process of compiling lists of virtues and vices implicitly starts with thinking about moral ideals, embodied in heroes or saints or cultural icons (or villains). That is, we implicitly draw our lists from a mental picture of someone we admire (or despise) as a model of moral excellence (or corruption). Role models who embody a moral ideal are anchors for moral education into the virtues (or vices), since we learn and acquire character traits by observing and imitating role models. From this model or ideal, we can then analyze more specifically what we find admirable or dishonorable about that person's character. A United States Marine embodies honor, courage, and fidelity; an Olympic athlete embodies perseverance and hope; a family practice doctor embodies compassion and wisdom; saints such as Mother Teresa are a model of kindness and mercy; heroes such as Martin Luther King Jr. are a picture of steadfastness and courage.

The Christian tradition is also explicit about its role model, a picture of perfected human nature, the image of God redeemed and restored, the one to be emulated by all human beings. As Aquinas writes, "Our Savior the Lord Jesus Christ . . . showed unto us *in His own self* the way of truth."[20] Christ's life and ministry model the virtues for us, and we must rely on the grace and power of the Holy Spirit to make progress in our imitation of him.[21]

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How do Christ's example and the work of grace affect a Christian view of virtues and vices?[22] A Christian understanding of temperance, for example, will have to include not only moderating our desire for food, but also fasting and feasting. Likewise, the virtue of courage challenges us to endure suffering for the sake of love, relying on God's strength, even to the point of martyrdom—this in contrast to contemporary portraits that show us a brave individual charging the enemy alone with guns ablaze. Christ teaches us too how gentleness and humility ground righteous anger, enabling us both to turn over tables of injustice and to turn the other cheek.

The tradition eventually singled out seven virtues—three theological virtues (faith, hope, and love) and four cardinal virtues (practical wisdom, justice, courage, and temperance). These are the qualities of character that *everyone* who wants to become Christlike must seek to cultivate, whatever his or her culture and calling. At the same time, these virtues are the foundation of human perfection for all human beings. They are meant to comprise a holistic picture of the human person—that is, to cover every aspect of our nature, from our mind to our will to our emotions, and to direct them all toward God.[23] According to the Christian tradition, everyone needs faith, hope, and love, as well as practical wisdom, justice, courage, and temperance in order to become all God intended him or her to be as a human being. Of course, courage can be manifested in different ways at different times—on a battlefield or a sickbed—but no one can hold firmly to the good in the face of pain and difficulty without it. Chastity, a part of temperance, can be fulfilled through marriage, celibacy, or seasons of singleness, but the married and the celibate alike are called to order sexual desire rightly. In a parallel way, the seven vices depict for us the traits of character to which we must die in order to live as people with Christlike character.

Why Study the Vices Today?

Other than piquing our historical interests, is there a good reason to try to recover the traditional Christian view of the vices? For Christians, there is both intellectual and practical payoff—in the way we understand ourselves and our world, and in the way our practices and prayers are reshaped. But for non-Christians as well, it is worth grasping the traditional view of the vices. This tradition has deeply shaped

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our culture, and it is worth understanding its influence—whether we accept or reject it—in order to better understand ourselves. I'll begin in what follows with several reasons that should appeal to both believers and nonbelievers.

First, we can find a wealth of references to the seven in films, books, and art. Studying the vices can help us uncover layers of depth and significance in contemporary stories and culture that trade on human weaknesses and temptations. For example, when we read *Brideshead Revisited* by Evelyn Waugh, we see a portrait of the vice of sloth in explicitly religious terms (although narrated by an agnostic character) and can recognize points of contact with the traditional, Christian conception of this vice. We also pick up on additional cues, for example, that the family name Waugh chooses in the novel—Flyte—stands for one of sloth's most common symptoms, escapism or flight. Likewise, many viewers could recognize the portrait of envy in the film *Amadeus*, even if few catch the equally acute depiction of vainglory in Salieri's need for public affirmation and acclaim. The film's opening scene, in which Salieri quizzes a priest to see if he recognizes any of Salieri's compositions, reveals a need for recognition and approval from others as deep as his envy of Mozart's musical gifts. It's a perfect illustration of Gregory the Great's claim that the two vices are intimately related. The film also links hatred of neighbor to hatred of God. Thus it shows how envy violates both aspects of charity—love of God and love of neighbor—the virtue to which it is opposed, in Aquinas's account. And long before today's abundant testimonies of the addictive power of pornography, Alan Paton's story *Too Late the Phalarope* offered a haunting case study of the binding and blinding power of lust and its power to destroy human relationships.

The vices also offer us a framework for explaining and evaluating common cultural practices. Envy and its offspring vice, *Schadenfreude*—joy at another's misfortune—go a long way to explaining the popularity of tabloids exposing and trumpeting the cellulite and poor fashion of the rich and famous. Reality shows of the makeover variety, which spawned a boom in cosmetic surgery, are a tribute to the power of vainglory and the image-driven advertising industry that requires it. Action–adventure films' formula for box office success depends on the celebration of wrathful revenge in the guise of righteous anger. Corporate workaholic culture depends on a secularized notion of sloth and mistakenly glorifies frantic industriousness as its opposing virtue. Modern-day gluttony drives inventions like diet sodas

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and specially manufactured potato chips that give us the pleasures of eating and drinking without caloric consequences.

Most importantly, however, understanding the vices can yield spiritual rewards. Most historical Christian figures treated in this book—Evagrius, Cassian, Gregory, Aquinas—wrote with a life of intentional Christian discipleship in mind. Aquinas, for example, makes the virtues the key building blocks of a Christian life, while the vices describe our greatest moral and spiritual pitfalls. Becoming holy involves "putting away" the sinful nature—the vices—and "clothing ourselves" with the character of Christ, the only human being who perfectly exemplifies the virtues.[24] The Christian tradition follows the apostle Paul's old-self/new-self distinction when it describes how our character is transformed from vice to virtue:

> You were taught to put away your former way of life, your old self, corrupt and deluded by its lusts, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness. (Eph. 4:22–24)

> Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry) . . . These are the ways you also once followed, when you were living that life . . . Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its practices and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator . . . As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience . . . Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. (Col. 3:5–14)

In other words, *the* moral project for a Christian is to die to the old self and rise to new life in Christ. This dying and rising is the rhythm of a life of discipleship, a life devoted to becoming more and more like Christ. Centuries before the advent of Christianity, the Greek philosopher Aristotle wrote that virtues and vices describe aspects of our character that become "second nature" to us. This makes the vices especially apt for describing our old sinful nature, and the virtues, for our new nature in Christ. Thus, Christian thinkers from Augustine through Aquinas overwhelmingly adopted the Greek conception of virtue and vice to describe the moral life and the development

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of Christian character.[25] We are to shed the old nature—described in terms of the vices—and put on Christlikeness—the virtues. The model of character change or moral formation therefore neatly fits the theological idea of transformation from the "old self" into a renewed and sanctified person.

One of the movements in the rhythm of discipleship and sanctification is the movement of dying. The practice of confession is where the "dying" of conversion repeatedly occurs. We come as though to the edge of our own graves and renounce our old self and its habits and practices. Yet that renunciation, as a preface to new life, requires knowing our sin. This is just how the tradition of the seven vices got started. The desert fathers' classification of seven vices began as a Christian system of self-examination in the fourth century and continued to provide an almost ubiquitous rubric for confession in penitential manuals up until the fifteenth century—an endurance that testifies to their power as a spiritual tool for confession and repentance. When we study the vices, we can better articulate for ourselves what parts of our sinful nature we are grappling with and trying to put to death, and learn how one vice might variously reveal itself in feelings and actions. We can use the list of vices to recognize and identify networks of sin in our lives and discover layers of sin of which we were previously unaware. In this way, our confession can be fine-tuned. Rather than praying in general for forgiveness of sin, or reducing all our sin to pride or generic selfishness, we can lay specific sins before God, ask for the grace to root them out, and engage in daily disciplines—both individually and communally—that help us target them. Naming our sins is the confessional counterpart to counting our blessings. Naming them can enrich and refresh our practices of prayer and confession and our engagement in the spiritual disciplines.

Reaching back to the tradition of virtues and vices can also give us fresh eyes and expose new layers of meaning in our reading of scripture. Before I read Aquinas on sloth, I would have associated it with only a few proverbs about sluggards and perhaps the parable of the talents with this vice. A closer study of sloth helped me to see it in the Israelites' resistance to embracing their new home in the promised land, and in Lot's wife turning back to the familiarity of Sodom while angels attempted to rescue her. Similarly, understanding the distinction between wrath and righteous anger helps us understand how Jesus integrated justice and love—how he could burn with anger against Pharisees who would deny a man healing on the Sabbath

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and then forgive those who crucify him. Studying avarice leads us to see connections between the story of the widow of Zarephath and the prodigal son. Once we grasp the envy–charity link, we gain new insight into the depths of the brothers' antipathy toward Joseph, Jacob's favorite son.

Finally, if we're able to identify our own sins more carefully, we'll be better equipped to reflect on and engage with the world around us. Are there areas of moral complicity or compromise in our own lives of which we are not even aware? Consider contemporary American culture, torn between relentless workaholism on the one hand and an obsession with maximizing leisure on the other. What lies behind this cultural ethos? Should Christians endorse the limitless pursuit of work as selfless diligence and godly industriousness? Or might they find in these lifestyles evidence of cravings for control, self-sufficiency, and a refusal to depend on God? Perhaps our drivenness, even more than our pursuit of leisure, is closer to vice than virtue.

Perhaps. Human culture and motivations are notoriously difficult to penetrate, even—or especially—when they have become our own. Why not, then, avail ourselves of the historical perspective and collective wisdom of the Christian tradition to help us see and know ourselves more truly? The project of becoming like Christ is our life's most important task. It makes sense to use every resource we can find to help us do it well. The whole story of human sin and failure cannot be told by our contemporaries or invented anew by our own imaginations. There is often value in contemporary reflection and our own insight. But when we seek moral advice, we need also to listen to the experienced, the devout, those saints and sages of past centuries whose insights often still ring true today.

C. S. Lewis once said, "We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea."[26] When we recognize our vices for what they are, we take a first step toward turning to the sea. When we understand the slum for what it really is, we can countenance preferring the seashore. Once we see the mud of our moral corruption, we are faced with the challenge of re-forming our habits from vice into virtue, a process that immediately confronts us with the need for grace. Dante Alighieri outlines the same movement in his *Divine Comedy*. Through remedial punishments, sinners come to grasp the true nature of their offenses

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and can be gradually weaned from their distorted desires. The fruit of this process is the full joy of a life in loving relationship with God.[27]

In the next chapter, we turn to the history and origins of both lists. This history reveals why certain vices made the infamous list of seven, why they are better called "capital" than "deadly," and what common theme explains their twisted but seductive search for happiness. Most importantly, this intriguing story shows us how the vices tradition was linked from the start to a Christian tradition of discipleship and spiritual formation, and how it can still serve those ends today.

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